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CONFIDENTIAL SECTION 01 OF 02 RPO DUBAI 000389

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: IRAN: CLERICAL CONFAB STIFFS RAFSANJANI FOR SUPREME LEADER

REF: RPO DUBAI 384

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alan Eyer, Director, Iran Regional Presence Office, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Oppositionist hopes that Iran's clerical class would mobilize to oppose Supreme Leader Khamenei's post-election policies appear sharply diminished in the wake of the first Assembly of Experts meeting since the June 12 Presidential election. Not only did the Assembly, which has the power to appoint, supervise and dismiss the Supreme Leader, give a ringing endorsement of Khamenei's rule and his handling of the post-election crisis, it did so in the conspicuous absence of its Chair, Ayatollah Rafsanjani. Moreover, leaks of the closed-door proceedings to the conservative press indicate that at least two prominent members of this clerical deliberative body excoriated Rafsanjani for his failure to support Khamenei during the unrest. Despite his absence at the closure of the Assembly of Experts meeting, Rafsanjani was compelled to publicly endorse the closing statement while seated at the knee of the Supreme Leader during a September 24 press conference.

END SUMMARY.

Assembly of Experts: A 'Deliberative' Body

2 (C) The Majles-e Khobregan, or Assembly of Experts (AOE), is a Constitutionally-mandated deliberative body composed of 86 directly-elected senior clerics from across the country. By law, the Assembly must meet for a minimum of two days twice a year. Though theoretically vested with the power to appoint, supervise and dismiss the Supreme Leader, in practical terms the Assembly's only real responsibility is to appoint the Supreme Leader's successor should he die or become incapacitated. As such, the AOE's last noteworthy act was appointing current Supreme Leader Khamenei after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's 1989 death. Every subsequent meeting has ended with the issuance of a perfunctory statement lauding the Assembly's decision to appoint Khamenei and praising his leadership. Nevertheless, according to Article 111 of the Constitution, the Assembly can find Khamenei unfit for office; accordingly, control of the AOE remains a (potential) check on the Supreme Leader's otherwise unbridled power.

¶3. (C) The Assembly is currently chaired by Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was re-elected to the two-year term of

Speaker in March 2009. At the time of his re-election, he garnered 51 votes, an improvement over the 46 votes he received in 2007, despite efforts by hardline conservative clerics, led by Ayatollahs Mesbah-Yazdi and Ibrahim Yazdi, to unseat him.

#### First Meeting since the Election

¶4. (C) On September 22-23 the AOE convened for the first time since Iran's disputed June 12 election. Rafsanjani opened the sixth official meeting of this Fourth Assembly of Experts by again cautioning that a "suspicious faction" is trying to create rifts among Iran's leaders and by condemning the "atmosphere of insults and dispute" that has prevailed since the June presidential election. He also promised that "system insiders of good will" are developing a plan to resolve Iran's domestic political problems. His opening statement was followed by reports to the body by Judiciary deputy Mohsen Ejei (Intelligence Minister during the presidential election and its aftermath) and Revolutionary Guards Commander Jaafari. According to press reports, at least sixteen Assembly members spoke.

¶5. (C) Though summaries of the closed-door proceedings released by Rafsanjani's office did not reflect any discord among the members and indeed indicated the body's support of him, conservative Iranian press charged Rafsanjani's office with 'censoring' coverage of the proceeding, reporting that at least two prominent members sharply criticized Rafsanjani for failing to support the Supreme Leader after the disputed election. One quotation prominently featured in conservative news outlets was Mashhad Friday Prayer Leader Ayatollah al-Hoda rhetorically asking Rafsanjani, "why after twenty years, have you remained silent in the face of these unprecedented insults (to the Supreme Leader)?"

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¶6. (C) More tellingly, Rafsanjani did not attend the second and final day of the meeting, with recently retired former Judiciary Head Ayatollah Shahrudi chairing in his absence. Hardline conservative Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami (the same cleric who replaced Rafsanjani as Qods Day prayer leader - reftel) read the Assembly's final statement, which was an unqualified if not fawning endorsement of the Supreme Leader himself and his "wise policies" for quickly extinguishing the post-election "flames of sedition." Khatami noted that Rafsanjani, despite his absence, agreed with "every point" of the final statement, which also credited Khamenei for dismissing the fraud allegations as part of a plot to undermine the Islamic Republic. The final statement was also noteworthy in its perfunctory congratulations to President Ahmadinejad for his election victory, and its more sincere admonishment of Ahmadinejad to scrupulously follow Supreme Leader Khamenei's guidance.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Following the disputed June 12 presidential election, many speculated that the axis of a Rafsanjani counter-attack would focus on rallying clerical support to his cause. However, the rumored AOE "emergency session" never convened, and absent such a meeting it remained unclear how much support Rafsanjani had among this body that reflects the political leanings of Iran's traditional senior clergy. Now that the AOE has met, it is clear that the clerical cavalry isn't coming over the horizon anytime soon. Furthermore, the AOE final statement, seen in conjunction with the removal of Rafsanjani as Qods Day Speaker (reftel), indicates in the clearest terms yet that in the most severe crisis of his career,

Rafsanjani is unable to mobilize his once vast and influential patronage network to achieve his political ends. And given that Rafsanjani's presumed power is serving as at least a partial deterrent to further regime moves against Mousavi, Karrubi and Khatami, the results of this two-day AOE session bode ill for the leadership of the oppositionist "Green Path of Hope." END

COMMENT.

EYRE